

## **A Message to Dad!**

# **The Value of a Father: A Qualitative Analysis of Children's Essays about their Father's Contributions**

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### **Abstract**

Literature supports that much of what we know about fathers has been primarily based on maternal accounts; however, more recently we have begun to ask men about their roles as fathers and are beginning to get a conceptual idea of how men identify these roles. Another area to be explored is the understanding of how children conceptualize fathers and what they report when asked about their fathers, as research has found that children's representations of parents and family are linked to adjustment later in life. The aforementioned line of inquiry is the focus of this quality study in which first-twelfth grade students from a large public school system in North Carolina were asked to respond to the following topic in essay form: "What My Father Means to Me." In all, fifty-seven entries were analyzed using a data-driven thematic coding approach and constant comparison techniques. No numerical ratings were used; instead, the goal was consensus. Several themes emerged as significant to children including: admirable qualities, contribution, time-spent, relationship dynamics, declarations of significance, and absent father. The themes expressed most by students were contribution, while absent father was mentioned the least. The results of this exploratory study allow us to hear the rare voice of children discussing the importance of their fathers and will hopefully increase interest for further investigation of their perspectives.

**Keywords:** fatherhood, father roles, narratives, parent involvement, child perceptions

### **Introduction**

Historically, much of what we know about fathers and their roles were reported by mothers (Coley, 2001). More recently we have begun to ask men about their roles as fathers and are beginning to get a conceptual idea of how men identify their role as a father (Coakley, 2013; Shears, Summers, Boller, &

Barclay-McLaughlin, 2006). Another area to be explored is the understanding of how children conceptualize fathers and what they report when asked about their fathers (Shears, Miller, McGee, Farinde, & Lewis, 2014). This line of inquiry may be important as the significance of the father-child relationship is also reported in adult children, retrospectively after having experienced a divorce as a child. Finley and Schwartz (2007) report that 61% of adults hailing from divorced homes identified with feeling as though there were missed opportunities for fathering, in addition to a longing for a father's presence as a result of divorce; this is in comparison to 38% of participating individuals from non-divorced homes. They suggest that in instances of divorce, retrospectively, adult children most often report a desire for a deeper relationship with their fathers versus with their mothers. Paternal influences significantly affect child and adolescent adjustment, in turn, affecting adjustment into adulthood well beyond corresponding maternal processes (Bryan, 2013; Gray & Anderson, 2010).

## **Fathering Roles**

Over the years, the role of father has been defined in many different ways and is often viewed as a fluid concept which is continuously being redefined by society (Olmstead, Futris, & Pasley, 2009). According to popular societal constructs of “father,” this role is often viewed in terms of being the financial provider for one’s family (Anderson, Kohler, & Letiecq, 2002; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004). However, due to the nontraditional family structures ever present in society (Pasley & Minton, 1997; Pasley & Braver, 2004), in addition to the many fathers dealing with economic instability, this popular definition of “father as provider” is losing its cultural relevancy (Black, Dubowitz, & Starr, 1999; Brophy-Herb, Gibbons, Omar, & Schiffman, 1999; Tamis-LeMonda, et. al., 2004; Cochran, 1997; Furstenberg & Harris, 1993; Garfinkel, McLanahan, & Hanson, 1998; Lerman, 1993; McLoyd, 1990; Perloff & Buckner, 1996). A recent review of literature around fathers' perceptions on their fathering roles indicates that dads consider themselves to be more than simply financial providers (Clarke, O’Brien, Day, Godwin, Connolly, Hemmings & Van Leeson, 2005; Coakley, 2013; Maurer, Pleck, & Rane, 2001; Summers, Boller, Schiffman, & Raikes, 2006). Furthermore, fathers report fathering as a multidimensional experience consisting of many responsibilities such as: being available, being sensitive, being supportive, being a caretaker, being an educator, and being a disciplinarian, among others roles (Olmstead, Futris, & Pasley, 2009).

Given what is known about how fathers define their role in terms of its multidimensionality, it is important to consider the conflict faced by many non-resident fathers. From a male’s perspective, a dad may be judging his worth as a father based on how many role identities he is able to satisfy (e.g., educator, caretaker). However, when he is not physically living in the home [anymore], research suggests that some sense of failure may be experienced, seeing as fathers have verbalized feeling as though they are only financial contributors to their children and nothing else (Pasley & Minton, 1997). This supports the notion that fathers conceptualize their roles in multifaceted terms. In fact, research suggests that when denied the forum to engage in dynamic fathering, many men experience ambiguity in their roles as fathers (Arendell, 1995; Kirven, 2014; Minton & Pasley, 1996). In sum, the literature

denotes that fathers are essential to the growth and development of their children; further the functions of fathers have evolved overtime. However, there is a dearth of literature exploring how children view their fathers and the vital roles they play in their lives.

## **Children's Representations of Their Fathers**

The evidence outlined above suggests that fathers play an important role in children's lives (King & Sobolewski, 2006; Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid & Bremberg, 2008; Olmstead, Futris, & Pasley, 2009); however, children's representations of their father and father figures are also important to explore. Research has found that children's representations of parents and family are linked to adjustment later in life (Cummings, Schermerhorn, Keller, & Davies, 2008; Dunn O'Conner, & Levy, 2002; Dunn, Cheng, O'Conner, & Bridges, 2004; Woolgar & Murray, 2010) such as moral development and internalizing behaviors (Emde, Wolf, & Oppenheim, 2003; Woolgar, 1999). Attachment theory explains children's family experiences and their emotional and social development by predicting the link between the child's attachment history and their adaptive competence (Hamilton & Howes, 1992). This attachment is important as fathers may continue to influence a child's competence even when the father is not present (Rose-Krasnor, Rubin, Booth, & Coplan, 1996). In the past, children's representations of parents and families have been conducted using the Draw-a-Family (DAF) task (Arteche & Murray, 2011; Gullone, Ollendick, & King, 2006; Madgigan, Ladd, & Goldberg, 2003; Roe, Bridges, Dunn, & O'Conner, 2006); MacArthur Story Stem Battery (Emde et al., 2003); and the Attachment Story Completion Task (Bretherton, Ridgeway, & Cassidy, 1990), and are typically used with young children between the ages of four and five. All of the aforementioned methods ask the children to either draw a picture of their parents and family or to create a play narrative of events, and/or use dolls and props (Arteche & Murray, 2011; Oppenheim, Emde, & Warren, 1997).

This research has been beneficial in understanding the emotional and social adjustment of children later in life. For instance, Arteche and Murray (2011) studied young children of mothers with Maternal Affective Disorder and found that children were more likely to represent themselves as less important, portray a dysfunctional family, and were less likely to draw themselves with a happy face. Another study that examined fathers in relation to maternal depression (Woolgar & Murray, 2010) reported that children's representations of their fathers were not related to maternal depression. However, the representations were reflective of parental conflict. Examining children's representations of parents and families can provide insight for understanding their development later in life.

Although beneficial for many reasons, the approaches listed above are limited in a number of ways. First, the approach is only used with specific age groups, though understandably (e.g., preschoolers and young children). Second, the approach is generally used to investigate particular mental health concerns of the parent. Lastly, the majority of the research focuses on children's representations of mothers; studies that do include fathers still link or compare children's

representations to the mother (Woolgar & Murray, 2010). Further, the children's representation studies do not explicitly consider the role of father figures. Thus, there is a need for broader research that captures children of all ages' representations of their fathers/father figures in a more general manner. These representations can be used to better understand how children view relationships with their fathers. Moreover, the purpose of this qualitative study is to explore children's representations of their fathers/father figures in a broad manner.

Internal factors of acceptance, guidance, bonding along with safety were significantly attributed by many children to their father's/father figure's influence on their lives' trajectories, as has been evidenced in the Father of the Year Essays, research suggests that father presence serves as a mediator for both internalizing and externalizing developmental problems in youth (Carlson, 2006). Thus, our main research question was to explore how children identify and portray their father/father figures.

## **Method: Design and Sample**

The qualitative data used for this research was from a large public school system in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina that participated in a *Father of the Year Essays* contest. All first-twelfth grade students within the school system were eligible to participate in the contest and were asked the following question: In 300 words or less, describe in your own words, "What My Father Means To Me." Participants also completed a self-report background information form that included demographics items such as "race" and "gender."

All essays were submitted to the students' teachers. The winners at each school were awarded tickets to attend a professional sporting event and the winning essays were displayed during the fathering event, held in conjunction with the sporting event. After the contest, the teachers gave the essays to the research team for the purpose of coding, along with the background information forms.

## **Analysis**

We analyzed 57 entries to amplify voices of children by capturing their understanding and conceptualization of the roles of fathers. An instrumental case study methodology was used in this study, and brings out the details from the viewpoint of participants by using multiple sources of data (Gibbs, 2002). This type of methodology is used to understand more than what is obvious to the observer. Creswell (2003) stated the contest that case study methods support the goals of researchers who seek to explore a single entity or phenomenon (the case), bounded by time and activity (a program, event, process, institution, or social group) and collects detailed information, by using a variety of data collection procedures during a sustained period of time (Merriam, 1988; Bogdan & Biklen, 2006) note that case studies are an ideal methodology when a holistic, in-depth investigation is needed. Because

the case study is a form of qualitative research, it is useful to begin the examination of it within a broad context.

The mean represented the winners at each school in first through twelfth grades. The median grade for students was sixth grade, and 47% of the participants were male and 54% were female. There were 41% African-American, 4% Asian-American, 38% Caucasian, 13% Hispanic youths, and 4% (n=2) reported being other. This was moderately representative of the racial/ethnic make-up of the Mecklenburg County school district with 5.2% Asian, 41.7% African American, 18.4% Latino, and 31.6% Caucasian students (Charlotte-Mecklenberg Schools, 2012).

A data-driven thematic coding approach was applied in an effort to allow the data to naturally emerge and identify key themes (Boyatzis, 1998; DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). However, the actual data procedures were guided by constant comparisons techniques (Charmaz, 2001; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The procedures were carried out by the second and third authors. First, each researcher independently coded a subsample of the essays line-by-line, using open-coding to identify initial categories. Next, axial coding was applied to confirm and expand categories. Finally, selective coding was used to establish themes using the entire sample of essays. Throughout the coding process, detailed memos were kept by the researchers to capture connections between categories, to record insight and to note additional questions (Charmaz, 2001). In terms of reliability, no numerical ratings were used; instead, our goal was consensus, which was achieved through in-depth conversation and clarification until the research team members reached agreement.

The researchers made every attempt to minimize the intrusive nature of my research. Stake (1995) wrote that in case study research we use ordinary language and narratives to describe the case. Each case was portrayed comprehensibly, using ample but non-technical descriptions. This research is noted as being highly personal. Stake (1995) further stated that because a case study is an exercise in such depth, the study is an opportunity to see what others have not seen, to reflect the uniqueness of our own lives, to engage the best of our interpretive powers, and to advocate for those things that are important. This study is unique because it illuminated a group of youth whose views on fatherhood are virtually unrepresented in the literature.

**Table 1. Demographics of Participants (n = 55)**

	Number
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	26 (47.2%)
Female	29 (52.8%)
<b>Grade:</b>	
1st	4 (7.3%)
2nd	6 (10.9%)
3rd	4 (7.3%)
4th	4 (7.3%)
5th	5 (9.0%)
6th	5 (9.0%)
7th	6 (10.9%)
8th	5 (9.0%)
9th	3 (5.4%)
10th	6 (10.9%)
11th	3 (5.4%)
12th	4 (7.3%)
<b>Race:</b>	
African American	23 (41.8%)
Asian American	2 (3.7%)
Caucasian American	21 (38.1%)
Latino American	7 (12.7%)
Other	2 (3.7%)
<b>Wrote about:</b>	
Father	47 (85.5%)
Father Figure	8 (14.6%)

\*Two Missing.

## Findings

Analysis revealed six themes from children’s representations of their fathers. The themes were: *admirable qualities, contribution, time-spent, relationship dynamics, declarations of significance, and absent father*. The themes expressed most by students were *contribution*, while *absent father* was mentioned the least. See Table 2. Additionally, particular categories are associated with each theme, except *absent father*; these are discussed below.

**Table 2. Percentage of Themes Expressed in “Father of the Year” Essays (n = 55)**

Themes	Percent
Admirable Qualities	15%
Contribution	48%
Time Spent	11%
Relationship Dynamics	14%
Declarations of Significance	11%
Absent Father	1%

**Admirable Qualities**

Several themes emerged with regard to how children measured the value of their fathers/father figures. One such theme found to be significant in the children’s assessment of their fathers/father figures includes *admirable qualities*, which refers to characteristics inherent to each father’s/father figure’s personality. The four subcategories associated with admirable qualities are: an aptitude for self-sacrifice, resiliency, heroism, and being influential.

*An aptitude for self-sacrifice.* An aptitude for self-sacrifice, the first subcategory, is defined as making a choice to “do without” to help others. The children who wrote about their fathers/father figures possessing this quality did not only refer to this aptitude for self-sacrifice as it applied to them, they often identified various scenarios in which this quality had been evidenced in their fathers’/father figures’ relationships with others. For example, one tenth grade girl writes, “He is a fireman and a paramedic and on the job he has shown his bravery and courage, He has risked his life in many hazardous situations to save others. He responded to the World Trade Center attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. My dad has accomplished many things in life. He always puts other before himself”. This quality was also frequently seen as it applied directly to children through various references to the father/father figure making personal sacrifices, for the betterment of the father/father figure-child relationship. A second grade male writes that although his father works long hours as a police officer, “...he always comes to my practices and games even after working all night.” This child further elucidates that his father often “sleeps in the van on the way to baseball games because he worked the whole night before.” These examples clearly outline the values quality of self-sacrifice by children.

*Resiliency.* Another admirable quality emergent in an analysis of the essays was *resiliency*. In many of the essays, children noted their fathers’/father figures’ abilities to overcome life’s challenges

despite what many children referred to as difficult upbringings or backgrounds. Resiliency has been defined as the father's/father figure's ability to bounce back from adversity. In one essay, a child describes how his father "...has always been around working hard to make ends meet..." despite a history of hardship. This tenth grade male adds that, as an immigrant, his father encountered much adversity and recognizes that it was a challenge for his father to overcome obstacles related to his background; he writes: "It is hard to thrive in an alien society with four children, but he did".

*Heroism.* *Heroism* was also identified in the essays as an admirable quality of significance and has been defined as an expressed admiration for specific qualities deemed to be heroic and/or someone for others to look up to. In many cases, children actually label their fathers as heroes (i.e., "my father is a hero" or "my father is my hero"). In other instances children provided examples, "We rode a roller coaster called Gold Rush. Toward the end of the ride when it had been stopped, a little girl had her foot out and got stuck between the tracks and cart. My valiant dad immediately got off the coaster and lifted it just enough to get her foot out of between the crack" (ninth grade female). Further, heroism is viewed subjectively and what many parents may initially consider small, insignificant acts (e.g., working long hours, obtaining an advanced degree) are most often categorized as heroic by their children. For example, one seventh-grade female says "He spent quite a long time working on his dissertation for this doctorate in ministry. It took him seven years until finally, last May, my dad received his doctorate. Seven years of reading, writing, and studying, and he made it."

*Being influential.* The last subcategory under admirable qualities is *being influential*. This quality is defined as the child explicitly stating that information received from his/her father/father figure will have a direct impact on their development. For example one teen wrote: "[My dad] is the most important person to me and the most influence on my life" (eleventh grade female). This quality was also seen as it applied to one's father/father figure being an influential figure in the lives of individuals other than the child. With regard to this use of "inspirational," one sixth grade male writes that his father has had such an impact on the decisions of others that family and friends have based significant life decisions, such as relocating, on advice from his father.

## **Contribution**

The second theme children indicated was *contribution*, role-specific qualities thought to contribute to the father-child relationship. These qualities are not necessarily viewed as inherent to one's personality; instead, they are being treated as intentional additions to the parent-child dynamic on the part of the father/father figure. Essentially, fatherhood may prompt an individual to adopt one or many of these qualities in an effort to better fulfill this role and satisfy the father-child relationship. The subcategory for the contribution theme are as follows: being supportive, being a life coach, being an educator, being respectful, providing nurturance/encouragement, being approachable, being a provider, being a protector, and being a caretaker. Ironically many of these roles are similar to roles that fathers indicate when asked what being a good father means to you (Shears et. al, 2006; Waller, 2012).

*Being supportive.* Many of the children's essays noted their fathers/father figures "being there" as significant to their relationships. This "being there" was most often referred to in a general manner by the children, and was thus defined for coding purposes as a physical or mental sense of security; one child writes the following statement about his father: "No matter what, he is always there." (10<sup>th</sup> grade female). Further evidence of this code can be found in another essay in which an eleventh grade female writes: "He has been there from the day I could talk to the first day of high school. He has been there for everything he recognized as important to me." This quality was seen frequently among the Father of the Year essays, indicating that fathers/father figures being supportive is significantly important for children to feel safe and comfortable.

*Being a life coach.* An overwhelming amount of children mentioned their fathers/father figures providing them with important life lessons or informal education. *Being a life coach* is defined as providing one's children with information about how to be successful in life. In their essays children discuss their fathers/father figures giving them instruction on issues around morality and personal development. Furthermore, the children indicated an understanding that this instruction is just as if not more important than formal education learned in school. One eighth grade male writes: "He has always taught me about the facts of life and has always taught me that above all, I need to respect my elders." Another student writes that his father has told him "...to never hold honesty in and to let it take the place of strong-hearted lies (5<sup>th</sup> grade male)."

*Educator.* In addition to the role of life coach, fathers/father figures assisting their children with homework and academics was also seen frequently throughout the essays and as such, has been coded separately as *Educator*. An example of this code is evidenced by the following essay excerpt: "After moving to North Carolina this summer, he has helped me with whatever I need to get to the level I should be in my new school. He takes the time to work with me on specific assignments to make the adjustment easier" (10<sup>th</sup> grade female). Another student writes: "He reads over an essay I have written and gives me ideas on how to make it better" (11<sup>th</sup> grade female).

*Being respectful.* Another emerging quality found in the essays representing a contribution to the father-child relationship was "being respectful." This quality was defined as the father/father figure holding the child in high regard. Most often, when this quality was seen, children were referring to communication styles with respect to their parental relationships. Many of the children would allude to their fathers/father figures treating them more maturely than is commonly seen among youth in their age group. One sixth grade male writes: "[My father] treats us like we are older and more mature than we really are." Essentially, fathers holding their children to a higher standard of responsibility can translate into children feeling respected as autonomous, decision-making individuals. After such statements indicating this respect they feel their fathers/father figures have towards them, these children often subsequently expressed their appreciation and mutual respect for their father/father figure for interacting with them in this manner.

*Providing nurturance/encouragement.* Given the importance of communication to the father-child dynamic, it comes as no surprise that some children cited their fathers/father figures nurturance and encouragement as significant to their relationships. Nurturance and encouragement has been defined as the father/father figure offering empathy to comfort their child in times of stress. In providing a specific example of this quality, one child writes: “[My dad] provides encouragement when I feel sad or upset about something. He finds words to always make it feel better.” (6<sup>th</sup> grade female). In describing her father, one eleventh grade female writes: “He encourages me to do things that make me feel happy and to speak my mind.”

*Being approachable.* The concept of *being approachable* also represented a quality of importance for children. Based on the various references from which this code was derived, being approachable was defined as the father/father figure demonstrating a welcoming disposition towards the child. This quality was viewed differently than “providing nurturance and encouragement” in that as an approachable father/father figure, a child may or may not be seeking out specific advice or support from the parent; instead, this approachability component represents a general openness in the father-child relationship. Children often discussed the relationships with their fathers/father figures in terms of an “open-door policy.” Essentially, these children shared that they would not be afraid to approach their fathers/father figures due to some perception of a misunderstanding or lack of understanding; instead, they verbalized that they are generally “on the same page”. As one sixth grade female reported: “My dad can relate to my problems, and that can be very comforting at times”.

*Being a protector.* The father as *protector* has been defined as the father/father figure defending the child and family from an actual or potential threat. When describing his father as his protector, one second grade male writes: “. . . while I am asleep he protects me from people that make bad choices”. The child rarely mentioned a specific situation in which the father/father figure had protected him/her from harm; however, the perception and assurance of fatherly strength appears to be sufficient in the child applying this label him as a protector.

*Being a provider.* Another quality found frequently reported was that of being a provider in the household; this quality has been defined as providing financial stability for the child. Few children specifically cited their fathers’/father figures’ occupations directly; instead, many of the essay entries made statements to the effect of: “My father has always been around working hard to make ends meet” (10<sup>th</sup> grade female). The nature of these entries suggests that children do not give as much credence to what their father/father figure does for a living as opposed to whether or not he is fiscally providing for the household.

*Being a caretaker.* Although not as prevalent as the financial provider, the concept of one’s father/father figure as *caretaker* did emerge as a consistent concept. This quality was viewed as distinctly different from the previously mentioned code of “provider” in that children were discussing

the manner in which their fathers/father figures provided non-fiscal stability for them (e.g., cooking, cleaning, attending to the hygienic needs of the child). In describing her father in this role, one female 5<sup>th</sup> grader writes: “My dad was ‘Mr. Mom,’ taking care of my brother and me. He used to drive us to all sports activities and took care of our house and meals.” Another example of this code can be found in the following statement by a seventh grader: “He cooks and cleans to keep me healthy” A fifth grade male writes: “My dad cooks, cleans, does laundry and shops for groceries.” This child adds: “My dad was kind of like a mom and dad all in one. In fact, my brother and I called him ‘MomPaw’ when we were younger. Interestingly, children never discussed any perceived abnormalities around their fathers/father figures occupying this gender-typed role; instead, the children writing about their fathers/father figures as caretakers alluded to a normalization of this role within their households.

### **Time-Spent Activities**

The third theme found in the qualitative analysis process involves the frequent mention of time spent and activities engaged in between the father/father figure and child. Time-spent activities are defined as time spent with child engaging in a specific activity. In providing an example of this code, one child writes: “He took me to a Hannah Montana concert... he takes me to the movies... he took me to Disney World... he takes me to see princesses and he takes me fishing (2<sup>nd</sup> grade female)”.

### **Relationship Dynamics**

*Relationship dynamics* refers to the central features of the bond between father and child. Within this theme three subcategories (i.e., friend, unconditional relationship and special connection) exist and are described below.

*Friend.* The first category under relationship dynamics is friend. Children described their fathers/father figures as a friend, a playmate/companion who is fun and someone the child electively chooses to spend time with. Children view their fathers/father figures as more than a parental figure. For instance, one third grade male wrote: “My dad isn’t just my father, but also my friend”. Another students explain that as a friend their father/father figure is consistent: “We play and practice *all* the time” (2<sup>nd</sup> grade male); compatible: “We have a lot in common and he understands me” (6<sup>th</sup> grade male); and engage in mutual exchanges: “We help each other out and push each other forward”. Friend was the dominant category under relationship dynamics.

*Unconditional relationship.* The second category under relationship dynamics is *unconditional relationship* and refers to a child’s rationale in explaining parent-child relationship dynamics. In other words, both the father/father figure and child realize that conflict and disappointment are natural parts of relationships, but it does not have to have a negative impact on the relationship. Further, this category is two-fold; first, students stress that fathers/father figures are understanding of them

regardless of a certain situation's outcome. For instance, one third grade female wrote: "I love my father because he doesn't get mad at me because I get my homework wrong sometimes". Second, students explain that they are understanding of their father/father figures when they have to be disciplined or when a disagreement arises. For example, one seventh grade female wrote: "He is strict. He punishes me when I deserve to be punished. He treats me with respect, but treats me like a child when I act like one. If he is overprotective or punishes me for whatever reason, that is what he is supposed to do right?"

*Special connection.* The final category under Relationship Dynamics is *special connection*. This category was defined as: when a child alludes to an unexplainable closeness/bond experienced between child and father/father figure. One child wrote: "My dad and I have a very strong bond because I am a daddy's little girl". Another student referenced the difficulty in putting the special connection with their father/father figure in words. One eleventh grade male said "Telling how much my father means to me is hard to put in writing. There are practically no words to explain my answer to that question". Lastly, students talk about the importance of that special connection: "I can't picture my childhood without my father. My father is an important aspect of my life" (8<sup>th</sup> grade male).

## **Declarations of Significance**

The fifth theme that emerged from the data is *Declarations of Significance*, where children express the outstanding and important their father/father figures are. Declarations of significance include the subcategories of just great, like him, and I wish.

*Just great.* Children used a number of phrases to describe how significant their fathers/father figures were to them in a category called just great. Children used phrases such as amazing, great, best, means the world to me, and significant in life. One sixth grade male wrote: "He's the superman of our time with a heart bigger than a cow and a truly healthy lifestyle. He is the number one dad." Another second grade male student wrote: "My daddy is the best because he loves me, mommy, and my brother, very much. He is better than all super heroes!"

*Like him.* Children also expressed the significant role of their father/father figure by writing about how they desire to have characteristics like them. The following statements are examples of the various ways students would like to emulate their fathers/father figures: "I want to be like him when I grow up" (2<sup>nd</sup> grade male); "I hope that when I am a husband and a father that I am just like him" (5<sup>th</sup> grade male); "He is inspiring and I hope to be half the man he is when I grow up" (5<sup>th</sup> grade male); and "I hope to be just like him. When he walks into a room, his presence lights up the room" (2<sup>nd</sup> grade female).

*I wish.* *I wish*, a statement of desire, is the last category under declarations of significance. For this category students generally indicate that they have a desire to spend more time with their

father/father figure. For example, a fourth grade female wrote: “What I would like more in my relationship with my dad is for him to take me on more of his business trips when he travels. Therefore, I would see him more and be with him more.” Additionally, a second grade female wrote: “I wish he was mine all day not, work.” A child from a single mother household desired to have a male presence in his life and wrote: “I am very grateful for my mom, but I need a male influence in my life to help me in ways my mom can’t” (6<sup>th</sup> grade male) and “If I could I would trade my whole life to fill just one of his days with happiness and bliss” (10<sup>th</sup> grade female).

### **Absent Father**

The final theme articulated in the essays was *Absent Father*. Some students discussed the impact of having an absent father, a father who is not available to child (e.g., physically, mentally, etc.). One tenth grade male wrote: “Well my real father isn’t a good father; he didn’t care about me when I was born.” Additionally, students acknowledged the extra stress their mother encountered due to their biological father’s absence; for example a sixth grade male wrote, “My mom is always there for me when I’m in trouble or need help with something. She always tried to be mom and dad”, and a tenth grade male said, “My father didn’t care he just left my mom and me at the hospital. My mother was devastated. She didn’t know what to do”.

## **Discussion**

### **Resiliency: Stories of Inspiration**

The frequent mention of resiliency as an admirable quality raises an important question for parents to consider: is it always in a child’s best interest to shield him or her from information pertaining to parents’ personal histories, especially if those histories are ridden with hardship? Based on the context in which resilience is cited in the essays, it can be argued that having knowledge of a parent’s challenging background can provide children with respect for who their parents are today and what they had to overcome to become these people. Essentially, when provided with a broader frame of reference from which to understand one’s parents, children have a greater opportunity to adequately assess the quality of their parent’s character. This assessment often facilitates a sense of pride for youth in which children note the inspirational qualities of their fathers’/father figures’ stories. Martin and Anderson (1995) assert that relationship satisfaction between fathers and their young adult children is associated with bi-directional open and honest experiences of self-disclosure; however, there are apparent gaps in research around this concept as related to fathers and their [still] developing children. Perhaps the significance of transparency as it applies to the imparting of parents’ personal histories should be an area of focus for future research around self-concept development in children in addition to research around parent-child relationship dynamics.

## Support for Fathers as Educators

Although *life coach* appeared to hold more weight with the children in the essays, fathers/father figures should not underestimate the significance of providing their children with more formal academic assistance. According to Gadsden and Ray (2003), society has historically focused on mothers' involvement as being a primary predictor of academic success in children; however, they argue that ignoring the effects of father involvement in the educational achievement of children can prove detrimental to their growth in the school environment. Gadsden and Ray (2003) suggest that vulnerable groups, such as low-income African American fathers, are at an increased risk for disengagement from their Children's educational processes as many of these individuals have reported inadequacies around the provision of academic support for their children based on self-perceptions of their own literacy. However, despite this valid fear felt by many fathers, research supports that independent of a father's educational background, children tend to perform better in school when they feel paternally supported at home with regard to academics (Mammen 2011; Shears, Miller, McGee, Farinde, & Lewis, 2014; Wall & Arnold, 2007; Waller, 2012). Given this knowledge, combined with the qualitative data found in the father of the year essays, perhaps future fathering programs should focus on supporting fathers in their efforts to engage their children academically using a strengths-based approach. Support programs for fathers as well as schools should encourage parents to use their own cultural strengths and backgrounds to enrich and build upon the learning experiences of their children.

## Nurturance and Encouragement

In their study of paternal and maternal forms of empathetic response, Miklikowska, Duriez, and Soenens (2011) found that although mothers often provide children with nurturance around inner or emotional stressors, fathers offer their children support and nurturance around cognitive stressors. Ultimately, both types of life stressors (emotional and cognitive) can pose difficult challenges for youth but fathers might be uniquely equipped to provide their children with the tools to face those cognitive hurdles. Our results support the notion that fathers should not downplay or underestimate their empathetic skills. Because, they have a special role to play in this process and their perspectives are clearly valued by their children.

## Abstract Qualities

A number of factors contribute to fathers/father figures being able to connect and effectively parent their children. Evidence-based parenting programs outline the importance of procedural parenting skills (e.g., child management, non-violent discipline, etc) and enhancing abstract qualities of both the child and parent, such as self-esteem and resiliency. Fortunately, a review of evidence-based parenting programs (e.g., Small & Mather, 2009) found that most programs offer a mixture focusing on procedural and enhancement skills. Our results support these approaches, especially the importance of fathers/father figures having abstract qualities. Traditional roles of fathers would suggest the importance of providing for their children (Ceglowski, Shears, and Furman, 2010; Negura &

Deslauriers, 2010). However, the students also highlighted the importance of abstract qualities such as resilience, sacrifice and being a role model. Therefore, fathers/father figures should see their roles of dynamic and fulfilling more than one role.

## Limitations

Given the relatively small sample size and the purposive nature of the sample, readers should use caution when considering the applicability of the findings to populations or communities beyond this sample. Youths completed the essays outside of a confidential research area and likely in the presence of their teachers and/ or parents which could have positive influenced their remarks. In addition, the nature of a contest connotes that the winner would be rewarded for the positive things and not the negative things about the fathers. This might account for the small number of responses regarding absent fathers. In addition, those children who did not have positive experiences would not likely enter the contest. Never-the-less, the contributions of this explorative study will enhance the dearth of literature on youths' perspectives about their fathers' qualities. Future studies could include confidential youth reports using standardized assessments that measure dimensions of father involvement and fathering.

## Conclusion

Results from the “*Father of the Year Essays*” presented highlight a number of areas not explored previously and are agreeable with other exploratory studies of fathers’ report of their fathering. One area of concern in the larger fathering literature is the importance of the role of provider as this might be more stressful for low-income men. However, it is clear from hearing from children that there is an appreciation of their fathers as a provider, regardless to their economic status or occupation. The results of this exploratory study allow us to hear the rare voice of children discussing the importance of their fathers. We have historically asked mothers about fathers and more recently asked men about their experiences as fathers. Now we have gone a step further and begun to understand Children’s reflection of their father. Ultimately this concept makes sense as a father’s effectiveness ultimately is about how effective he is in rearing his children from his own child's perspectives.

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